

***Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry.* Edited by Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne. The William and Katherine Devers Series in Dante Studies. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. 388 + xii pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-268-03519-8 (pbk.: alk. paper). ISBN-10: 0-268-03519-9 (pbk.: alk. paper).**

Late in the *Commedia*, Dante refers to his masterwork as “the sacred poem to which heaven and earth have put their hand” (*Paradiso* XXV.1–2). Lately this has often been read as the most scandalous of several bold claims the poem offers of its own inspired authority and veracity; it is also a convenient indicator of how Montemaggi and Treherne’s volume of eleven essays can be a welcome and well-needed contribution to Dante studies, despite the vertiginous quantity of preceding material produced by seven centuries. How can the publication of yet another book on the *Commedia* – and not even a monograph or collection of published articles, but the proceedings of a conference (albeit with more polish and substantive notes than most of that genre) – possibly be justified, to humanity and to the trees? Because the work of the last half-century has quite unsettled the question of what exactly Dante was claiming for his poem at such moments, and thus of how *il poema sacro* should be read with regard to *sacra doctrina*. As the answer to this question must be of great concern to any serious reader of the poem, there is nothing to do but push on (with apologies to the trees); these essays provide a good impetus, and illustrate both the promise and peril of reading the *Commedia* as theology.

The promise rests on the merit of the principle of interpretation which editors inscribe in the volume’s title and describe in their introduction: “Dante’s theology is not what underlies his narrative poem, nor what is contained within it: it is instead fully integrated with its poetic and narrative texture” (4). Dante’s evident comfort with Scholastic terminology and theological debates, and his extraordinary ability to weave such language seamlessly into vernacular hendecasyllables, may tempt the reader to treat the many evidently doctrinal passages<sup>1</sup> of the *Commedia* as intellectual material more or less separable from its poetic form and narrative context. This alleged separability may be regarded positively, as establishing a layman’s theological credentials in spite of his role as poet, or negatively, as revealing a medieval mind’s prosaic hair-splitting in spite of great poetic skill; these might be called the Scholastic and Romantic extremes of past interpretation. Between them lies the third way which the editors and most of the other authors represented here seek to reinforce and extend: reading Dante’s theology as intimately and ineluctably poetic.

One aspect of that reading – the less groundbreaking, but also the less debatable – is engagement with themes and images which make no discursive claims but are nonetheless theological *loci*. So Treherne’s essay, “Liturgical Personhood: Creation, Penitence, and Praise in the *Commedia*,” provides a reminder of how indispensable for Dantists is knowledge of the medieval liturgy, which Dante regularly weaves into his poem, including quasi-liturgical performances of doxologies and the *Sanctus*, and plentiful sacramental imagery. Commentators have long recognized such elements, but typically as ornamentation adding little to the

theological substance of the poem – especially in the latter two canticles.<sup>2</sup> Treherne’s thesis that “the movement of souls to God is suggested [...] through a shift in liturgical performance towards praise, a shift that takes place throughout Purgatory and is fulfilled in Paradise” (132)<sup>3</sup> helps to explain the real difference between completed purgation – the correction of disordered inclinations towards finite goods, accompanied and effected by penitential prayer – and the ascent to blessedness, i.e., unmediated vision of the source of all good, anticipated and reflected by self-forgetful prayers of praise, extolling the Good for its own sake.

Likewise, Theresa Federici (“Dante’s Davidic Journey: From Sinner to God’s Scribe”) observes that Dante’s combined roles as poet and penitential pilgrim of the *Commedia* are uniquely correspondent to the medieval view of David, who is at once “exemplary model of repentance” (181), poet (as author of the Psalms), and prophet.<sup>4</sup> This correspondence is borne out in manifold ways throughout the *Commedia*: e.g., the pilgrim’s first spoken words are the introit of Psalm 50, *Miserere mei*,<sup>5</sup> which recurs five other times in the poem; and the psalms in general are accorded a special role in giving the pilgrim the virtue of hope (*Paradiso* XXV). That much is certain and valuable; but Federici goes on to argue that such references do not just assimilate Dante’s roles to a superior model, but undergird his claim to a *poema sacro*: to some extent “Dante presents himself as a divinely inspired poet following the Davidic model” (182). To what extent, exactly? “Dante does not claim superiority over the Psalms on a level of content” (a wise move); he “does suggest, however [...] that his message is also in some way divinely inspired, and that his poetic talent is, on a strictly human level, in a sense superior to that of biblical authors” (201). The phrases “in some way” and “in a sense” bear rather an inordinate burden here; and the notion that Scriptural inspiration is limited to formless intellectual content, the human author being responsible for the choice of words, seems inadequate to Dante’s era.

Again, David’s son Solomon (regarded as the author of the Song of Songs) has been convincingly established as an important model for the distinctive poetics of *Paradiso*, and Paola Nasti (“*Caritas* and Ecclesiology in Dante’s Heaven of the Sun”) extends this work by associating the long-standing Christian referral of the Song’s Bride to the Church with Dante’s ecclesiology, and that with the Sphere of the Sun wherein Dante encounters those blessed souls marked especially by wisdom (including Solomon himself). Three times in that Sphere the Church is referred to as the ‘spouse of God’, and these along with other wedding-metaphors support the claim that “for the poet, both the Church of the perfect and true wisdom could not exist unless marked by the seal of *caritas*” (217). The former point is perhaps too universally-attested to present anything distinctive about Dante; the latter – that the virtue of wisdom cannot exist without charity – could be a sharper entry into debates over the distinctions and connections among acquired, infused, and theological virtues, but here it is left rather inchoate. Still, the relevance of the *Song* here is well-observed, even if, like Federici, Nasti is merely adding a new facet to recent work.<sup>6</sup>

Most of the volume’s essays, however, concern the other aspect of reading Dante’s poetry as theology: addressing how the poetic expression of theology may differ fundamentally from, and challenge, those discursive modes of exegesis or systematic exposition often identified with

theology *tout court*. Hence these essays take up more directly the editors' stated purpose, and have the potential to make more groundbreaking claims for the *Commedia* – but also to fall into the peril of this sort of reading. What was called above the Scholastic mode of reading the poem, despite its well-observed flaws, has had at least an incidental advantage: it happens to have provided a great deal of philosophical and theological context for the terms Dante uses and the debates into which he enters, allowing modern readers to navigate foreign intellectual waters more surely. A third way which takes the poetry more seriously ought to be no less conversant with that prosaic context, lest through the cross-cultural affective appeal of the poetry it fall into theological anachronism or overgeneralization. Here the volume has its flaws as well as its successes.

So, for example, the editors claim that central to the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic intellectual traditions, and especially potent for understanding Dante's theology, is the claim that "full comprehension of God lies beyond the grasp of human intellect and language, since the origin of all that is lies 'beyond' being itself" (5). Now the first clause will certainly find wide assent; but the second is quite partisan and disputed, especially for Dante's theological patrimony and contemporaries. The Pseudo-Dionysius, Maimonides, and Eckhart might well agree, though perhaps in different ways; Thomas and Scotus would certainly disagree, and certainly in different ways.<sup>7</sup> Since the question at hand – *viz.*, whether predicating existence of the "ground of all existence" (6) is univocal, analogical, or equivocal with predicating existence of sensible being – is a major point of divergence among medieval accounts of divine naming, to take equivocality as a point of common accord not only flattens the theological landscape but begs the proximate question of Dante's position, which must be determined on the evidence he provides, not assumed from a common denominator.

Montemaggi engages this evidence – Dante's various indications that God is beyond human comprehension and language – to powerful effect in his own essay, "In Unknowability as Love: The Theology of Dante's *Commedia*." Yet this more focused discussion still lacks some of the distinctions missing from his and Treherne's introduction;<sup>8</sup> and while Dante's text is the starting-point, arguments take flight beyond textual justification, belatedly adding upon landing a phrase like "according to Dante" as a sort of *Dante ex machina*: "One gets one's theology wrong, according to Dante, unless one's sense of what it means to talk about God is grounded in the recognition of what it would mean for human communication to be seen merely as useful or instrumental" (90).<sup>9</sup> Finally, in his main thesis – that Dante privileges the will over the intellect in his account of human beatification,<sup>10</sup> with the consequence that earthly reasoning and speaking of God must be somehow redefined by love of God and one's neighbor – Montemaggi does not mention the most explicit (and unfortunately quite contrary) datum on this topic, Beatrice's observation that "blessedness is founded on the act of vision, not on the act of love, which follows it" (*Paradiso* XXVIII.109–11). Perhaps this could be accounted for; at any rate it must be dealt with. Certainly Dante denies that the Beatific Vision grants human intellects the same comprehension that God has of himself; but this is no reason to elide earthly and heavenly incomprehension of God, and hence the respective earthly and heavenly orderings of will and

intellect. Still, these are criticisms of inexact phrasing more than substance; Montemaggi's essay remains a profound reflection on the intimate association between human nature and the capacity and need for language, and how this association evidently shaped Dante's thought on human fulfillment. The application of *De vulgari eloquentia* to *Purgatorio* XXV's description of the newly-rational embryo as "fante" (speaking) is golden, as is the contrast between Ulysses' doomed voyage of willfulness and the pilgrim's submission to God's will, an association clearly marked by the same cryptic phrase, "come' altrui piacque" (as pleased another).

A lack of crucial distinctions also mars Christian Moevs's "Il punto che mi vinse': Incarnation, Revelation, and Self-Knowledge in Dante's *Commedia*."<sup>11</sup> Moevs focuses on Dante's vision of the *punto* or point of light from the Primum Mobile, which is heretofore the pilgrim's closest vision of God; in sum (although Moevs might dispute this account), his thesis elides Dante with Plotinus, by way of eliding Plotinian Neoplatonism with the Aristotelianism to which Dante ostensibly cleaves. E.g.: "Pure awareness or intellect (consciousness) in itself is nothing at all: it is the power to be everything and nothing. This is because for Aristotle, and for the whole Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition following him, awareness or consciousness (intellect) is nothing (not a thing) until it thinks, and when it thinks, it is what it thinks." There is truth to this – endnotes point the reader to *De anima* III.4 and *Metaphysics* XII.7 – but it is a truth about the possible intellect, not intellect *tout court*, and thus it applies only *secundum quid* to human intellect and not at all to divine intellect.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, even as regards the possible intellect, Moevs's elision of potentiality or privation with utter non-being tosses aside the foundational work of *Physics* I and thereby any authentically Aristotelian physics and metaphysics altogether.<sup>13</sup> By way of this Aristotle-cum-Parmenides, Moevs pins on Dante's Christian Aristotelism claims of the radical unreality of all save the One Being, and thence of a Plotinian monism: "Dante will pass over from the *Primo Mobile*, from the limit of the world, into the Empyrean itself. This is to know all things as 'not other' than oneself, that is, as a projection or reflection of Being itself" (270).<sup>14</sup> Obviously this is a critique beyond the choice of words; still, as in Montemaggi's essay, there is much to learn here in spite of dubious accounts of Aristotle. That the outset of *Paradiso* XXIX, describing Beatrice's momentary silence by way of an elaborate cosmological comparison, in fact describes no time at all, and represents the moment of creation, seems undeniable; it also fits the metaphor perfectly into the explicit consideration of creation which follows – yet another instance in which Dante's universally-attested poetic craftsmanship ought to be more universally-regarded as intimate to his philosophical theology.

Piero Boitani, in "The Poetry and Poetics of Creation," also deals with *Paradiso* XXIX, arguing that Dante in a way reenters the role of the earliest Presocratic philosophers as theologizing poets, in whom the wonder at and thirst for understanding the universe and the love of myth were united: "Dante thus emerges as a *poeta theologizans*, who treats *de principiis rerum poetice et fabulariter*" (124) – except that for Dante it is a deliberate choice of mode, in tension with Scholasticism, because even a well-developed and systematic philosophy must not eradicate wonder. This point (drawing upon the work of Patrick Boyde, who called Dante *Philomythes*), is well made; and likewise it is true that Dante is eclectic in his choice of

authorities, not a strict disciple of Thomas or any other theologian.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Boitani overreaches; he claims that the points on which Dante rejects theological authorities include: “Thomas Aquinas, on the number of substances first created; Jerome and Aquinas, on the time elapsing between the creation of the angels and the creation of [...] the rest of the universe; Augustine and Aquinas again on the memory of the angels [...]; and Aquinas again, among others, on the presumed eclipse during Christ’s Passion” (123). Four swings at St. Thomas, four misses;<sup>16</sup> the last is perhaps the most unfortunate. Here indeed is a provoking consideration for one of Dante’s alleged authorities – but not Thomas. For if Dante knew of the Thomistic text, as that text is totally transparent to the Pseudo-Dionysius’s alleged eyewitness account,<sup>17</sup> the poet could only be saying (presciently enough!) that the witness lied – and this shortly after trumpeting the same witness’s quasi-apostolic authority (on the angelic hierarchies). Perhaps it is more likely that Dante knew nothing of the Dionysian epistle in question, and perforce of the Thomistic text reporting it; in any case, in Boitani’s account (shared by other Dantists) the true problem is eclipsed.

Contrariwise, Denys Turner’s essay, “How to Do Things with Words: Poetry as Sacrament in Dante’s *Commedia*,” convincingly attacks another common assumption of Dante’s divergence from Thomas, by way of mutual comparison with Eckhart: Thomas calls poetry “least of all the sciences [*doctrinas*]” (*Summa theologica* I q. 1 a. 8),<sup>18</sup> but while commentators have usually focused on the adjective “least,” it is significant that in fact he calls it a *doctrina*, and speaks positively of poetry’s mimetic role as naturally pleasing to man. This stands in some contrast to his earlier treatment in his commentary on the *Sentences*, and to those of many contemporaries. In short, while Scholastic theology in general may have had a certain suspicion of poetry, here too there is not a uniform field of opinion, and oddly enough Thomas could have reinforced Dante’s regard for the theological potential of Christian poetry – potential drawing strength from its lowliness as a doctrine (its use of metaphor and often dissimilar symbols). While here too, an explicit discussion of analogy is curiously lacking,<sup>19</sup> Turner makes an extremely valuable point – and not just for Dantists – about the complexity of medieval theological regard for poetic language.

Let this suffice to indicate with any detail the kind of range, insight, and difficulties the volume’s essays present. Those not already mentioned are no less valuable: Robin Kirkpatrick’s “Polemics of Praise: Theology as Text, Narrative, and Rhetoric in Dante’s *Commedia*” makes the provocative point that poetic theology especially resists the “second-order discourse” in which academics typically rest secure,<sup>20</sup> and that perhaps the greatest virtue of the theology of the *Commedia* is that an adequate response to it, positive or negative, demands the risk of first-order claims about God (such vitality, the sense of living theological questions provoked by the poem, suffuses the whole volume);<sup>21</sup> Peter Hawkins’s “All Smiles: Poetry and Theology in Dante’s *Commedia*” highlights (like Boitani’s essay) Dante’s insistence that “personal experience, face-to-face vision, trumps everything else” (40), and relates this to the fact that Beatrice’s smile (along with her eyes) is the very means by which the pilgrim ascends through the heavenly spheres, preparing him for the vision of Christ which (Hawkins suggests), even if

Dante does not say so, the reader should understand as a smiling face, allowing participation in the “inner smile” of the Trinity; Oliver Davies’s “Dante’s *Commedia* and the Body of Christ” gives perhaps the volume’s clearest statement of the tension involves in reading poetry as theology, and argues crucially that the poem should be compared less to a mystical *excessus* than to the Transfiguration, given its insistence on the exaltation and not dissolution of human embodiment in blessedness: “Dante’s cosmic journey remains grounded in the ‘transfiguration’ of his own body in the presence of the living, transformative body of Beatrice, thus giving a full Christian expression to the Platonic vision of his earlier years” (175); by contrast, Douglas Hedley’s “Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Imagination in Dante’s *Commedia*” emphasizes the persistence of “Platonic vision” in the poet’s mature thought, and while falling into some false dichotomies<sup>22</sup> and making some rather tenuous links to Platonism,<sup>23</sup> ends strongly: “if, on the basis of [Dante’s] Christianized Neoplatonic metaphysics [...] there is an ontological bond between the ‘images’ of the mind’s imagination and ‘Being’ in the most exalted sense of that word, then the poet can indeed be a vehicle of truth” (263).

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## Notes

1. I.e., those lengthy digressions from the narrative action which provide a technical explanation of some feature of the afterlife or of the cosmos in general, rare in *Inferno* but increasing in *Purgatorio* and dominant in *Paradiso* – it is no coincidence that many an engrossed reader of the first canticle has balked at the latter two.
2. Such elements may be found in *Inferno* as well – e.g., the distorted introit to the hymn *Vexilla regis* which introduces Satan, or the inverted echoes of baptism among the Simonists – but in a parodic mode, which has been better accounted for in modern scholarship, perhaps as more congenial to an overweening taste for irony; it is the straightforward and heartfelt use of prayer and praise among the saved which is more often relegated to window-dressing.
3. This thesis is somewhat undercut by an uncongenial datum, the presence of the *Gloria in excelsis* in *Purgatorio* XX; Treherne attempts to explain it away, in part by contrasting it with what he calls another “version of the Greater Doxology” (150) in *Paradiso* XXVII. But the latter – which reads precisely, “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to Holy Spirit” [vv. 1–2] – seems to be rather a different prayer, the Lesser Doxology. The other elements of Treherne’s explanation are more convincing.
4. It is worth noting that on the latter two points the view is not so much medieval as simply Scriptural: cf., e.g., Acts 2:25–31.
5. *Inferno* 1.65, where the first term is Latin, ensuring the intended reference.
6. The only significant typographical problems in the volume appear in this essay: there are nearly a dozen minor mistakes in the Latin texts quoted.

7. As punctuated, the second clause remains ambiguous; Thomas might agree if the quotation marks around the word 'beyond' are supposed to supply "...beyond being, according to the human mode of signifying being, whereas the thing signified is the same." But that is a heavy conceptual burden to put upon inverted commas. Shortly thereafter the editors quote David Burrell to the effect that for Thomas, "this One is indeed 'beyond being' *as we know beings*" (7, emphasis added), which in its added phrase suffices to convey the Thomistic distinction *contra* Maimonides et al.; but the editors themselves leave no such room.
8. E.g.: "To be human is to be an embodied, rational, linguistic, and social being. It is impossible, on Dantean terms, to think of any one of these aspects of human existence in any other way than in conjunction with the others" (68). The (presumably) intended point – that 'linguistic' and 'social' are proper accidents of the species 'rational animal' – does come through, and it is well-grounded in and well-observed of Dante's reflection on human language in *De vulgari eloquentia*; but as stated the claim entails that, e.g., thinking of the aspect 'embodied' necessarily entails thinking of the aspect 'rational' – better to observe a distinction between real and notional separability. Cf. also 60: "For Dante [...] to be human, to speak, to love, and to be related to God are, if properly conceived, one and the same thing."
9. I.e., one could argue that this claim about right theologizing illumines Dante; but nothing like sufficient evidence has been given for stating that Dante himself makes this claim, however implicitly.
10. E.g., "the very form and essence of heavenly being is defined by the coming together of the individual will of the blessed and the will of God, as one will" (66).
11. This essay distills the central thesis of Moevs's 2005 monograph, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy*.
12. *De anima* III.5 makes clear that the 'mind' of the previous section's discussion was mind-as-potential, possible intellect; and *Metaphysics* XII.7 explicitly rejects mind-as-potential as the aspect of the human mind analogous to divine thinking: "Therefore the possession rather than the receptivity is the divine element which thought seems to contain."
13. Note that even in *De anima* III.4, Aristotle makes the same claim for "the sensitive part" as for the intellectual, *viz.*, that it "can have no nature of its own, other than that of having a certain capacity" – clearly this lack of a nature is potency in a principle, not non-being.
14. Incidentally, it seems that the really crucial *punti* of Moevs's essay are typographical, the punctuation marks by which he repeatedly essays a sort of glissade between Christianity and monism – inverted commas in the case above, but more often parentheses: the human intellect must "come to know itself as (one with) pure intellect or being, the reality that contains, sustains, and creates all things" (269), and again "to know itself as (one with) the ground of all things" (273). The closed circle of parenthesis seems to be Moevs's recreation of his view of the sphere of the Primum Mobile: what it contains is the difference between monism and Christianity, but what it contains can be dropped without change in meaning (since nothing therein really subsists), and hence there is no difference.
15. However, Boitani's substantial section on elements of Origen he finds parallel to Dantean themes gives no indication of by just what means the poet might have known of these texts.
16. As to the first three: (1) The doctrine of 'four coevals' (simultaneous first creations: Angels, Empyrean, Time, Matter) was traditional by Thomas's time, and he quite explicitly treats it as such, having a mild *auctoritas* to be saved as possible; he saves it in such a way as to agree with

- Dante (who does not mention time): Thomas is willing to accept time only in a highly qualified way, since it is an accident and thus logically posterior to substance (leaving only three proper kinds of objects of creation, like Dante: *Summa theologica* I q. 66 a. 4). (2) On the second point Thomas records Jerome's position as not necessarily erroneous, but explicitly favors the position which Dante adopts, that of simultaneous creation (*Ibid.* q. 61 a. 3); Dante simply rejects Jerome more forcefully. (3) To the claim that angels have memory (*Ibid.* q. 64 a. 5 arg. 2), Thomas first responds that, simply speaking, they do not (precisely Dante's position); then he again saves the *auctoritates* in question (especially Augustine) as well as he can, by positing that either (a) they were speaking on the tentative hypothesis that angels are naturally united to bodies, or (b) they were speaking through a certain similitude to real memory (again, simply speaking Thomas denies even intellectual memory to angels, for they have no possible intellect: *Ibid.* q. 67 aa. 6–7).
17. Thomas does favor the account of the moon miraculously retracing half its orbit to cover the sun during the Crucifixion, and Dante calls this account a lie; but Thomas favors it only and explicitly on the basis of the Pseudo-Dionysius's claim to have seen the eclipse himself while living in Egypt at the time – he grants it no theoretical or exegetical advantage (to that extent he reports favorably the position Dante adopts, that the sun's own light was hidden without an intervening body), but because he thinks it an eyewitness account, it trumps indecisive theoretical considerations (*Summa theologica* III q. 44 a. 2 ad 2).
  18. In fact the phrase occurs in an objection; it should be noted that this is not clearly *in voce Thomae*.
  19. Such a discussion might better have specified the claim that Thomas's "confidence in the theological worth of ordinary speech" is "subordinated to a governing apophaticism" (297).
  20. Kirkpatrick also brings a certain poetry to his own prose: "Our characteristic existence [...] lies in time and language, themselves both modes of exile. So much to say, so little time to say it, and so much, anyway, that is unsay-able. The Cross confirms all that and gives it, quite undeservedly, some meaning."
  21. This is brought out by the two afterwords, in which John Took ("Dante, Conversion, and Homecoming") and David Ford ("Dante as Inspiration for Twenty-First-Century Theology") comment upon the overall themes of the volume and their relevance for contemporary existentialism and theology, respectively.
  22. "Religion is not, for Dante, a set of facts *extra nos* but rather is inextricably linked to the inner life" (249).
  23. "The *Commedia* thus presents us with the idea that prophecy and poetry are intimately linked, an idea that, especially in the light of texts such as the *Phaedrus*, we can once again characterize, at least in one of its aspects, as Platonic" (252). By his heavy qualification it seems Hedley feels the problem of finding a plausible source by which this *Phaedrus*-doctrine came to Dante; perhaps the difficulty would be removed by Federici's reminder (see above) that "prophecy and poetry are intimately linked" in Scripture, in David's Psalter, and whether or not the Platonic tradition may have confirmed this for Dante is rather secondary.